

Policy Forum 09-003: S. Korea Should Cooperate with U.S. on N.K.

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S. Korea Should Cooperate with U.S. on N.K

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By Cheon Seongwhun

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I. Introduction

Cheon Seongwhun, a senior research fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), writes, "the Obama administration is likely to ask for stronger verification measures than what was agreed during the Bush administration... The new administration will regard material sampling as an indispensable condition for effective verification, and even push for inspections on undeclared facilities, the nuclear testing site, and explosive testing facilities which were practically exempted

from verification under the current agreement."

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II. Article by Cheon Seongwhun

- "S. Korea Should Cooperate with U.S. on N.K"
By Cheon Seongwhun

The U.S. presidential election in 2008 has made it obvious that the next administration will put a greater emphasis on nonproliferation and disarmament efforts, especially in the nuclear area. Despite differences in other policy areas, the two presidential candidates - Barack Obama and John McCain - had shown many similarities in their nuclear policies. Both agreed to reduce the possibility of using nuclear weapons and realize deep cuts in the world's nuclear arsenals.

They wanted to curb the vertical proliferation of nuclear weapons. At the same time, the two candidates sought to increase efforts to restrain horizontal proliferation by strengthening nonproliferation regimes, regulating the use of nuclear materials, and preventing the emergence of new nuclear-armed states.

Obama Administration Positions

According to the Party Platform adopted in August 2008, the Democrats made much of preventing the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons - so-called weapons of mass destruction. This reflects the reality that the United States is at war with terror on two fronts and deeply concerned about the possibility of a terror attack using WMDs.

The Democratic Party "will urgently seek to reduce dramatically the risks from three potentially catastrophic threats: nuclear weapons, biological attacks and cyber warfare." The rationale is that in an age of terrorism, these dangers take on new dimensions; nuclear, biological, and cyber attacks all pose the potential for large-scale damage and destruction; and the capacity to inflict such damage is spreading not only to other countries, but also to terrorist groups.

Based on such awareness, the Democratic Party Platform proposed the following eight policy measures: to realize a world without nuclear weapons, to secure nuclear weapons and the materials to make them, to end the production of fissile material, to end Cold War nuclear postures, to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, to denuclearize North Korea, to mitigate threats of biological and chemical weapons, and to enhance cyber-security.

During the campaign trail, President-elect Obama also defined three potentially catastrophic threats to the United States - nuclear weapons, biological attacks and cyber warfare. In order to reduce the danger of nuclear terrorism, Obama presented five policy measures: to secure nuclear weapons materials from illegal trafficking, to phase out highly enriched uranium from the civil sector and thus, reduce possible diversion of the material for military purposes, to strengthen policing and interdiction efforts so as to prevent proliferation, to build individual state's domestic capacity to prevent theft, diversion, or spread of nuclear materials, and to convene a summit on preventing nuclear terrorism worldwide.

After the election, Obama put on his website the "Obama-Biden Plan" under the agendum of "Protecting America." The plan proposes eight broad areas where nationwide efforts should be made to resolve security problems. They included: "defeat terrorism worldwide, prevent nuclear terrorism,

and strengthen American biosecurity." In particular, the plan emphasized "tough, direct diplomacy" backed by real incentives and real pressures to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and to eliminate fully and verifiably North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Nuclear Disarmament

The Obama administration is expected to launch an aggressive campaign to drastically reduce the world's nuclear weapons cache. The Democratic Party Platform argues that "America will be safer in a world that is reducing reliance on nuclear weapons and ultimately eliminates all of them," setting the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide - a central element of U.S. nuclear weapon policy.

To support this perspective, it is highly likely that the following measures will be adopted by the new administration: announcement of nuclear weapons as a "last resort," the Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, new negotiations with Russia to make deep cuts in nuclear arsenals, internationalization of the U.S.-Russia Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the expansion of nuclear disarmament talks involving all nuclear weapons states. On these and other issues, the Obama administration's positions will be articulated in the upcoming Nuclear Posture Review Report.

The new administration's nuclear posture is intimately related with its perception of what U.S. leadership should be in the 21st century. As the Phoenix Initiative Report suggested by framing so-called strategic leadership of the new U.S. administration, the Obama administration will keep in mind that "Leadership that serves common goals is the best way to inspire the many different peoples of the world to make shared commitments."

One way to embody this strategic leadership would be that the United States leads nuclear disarmament efforts by example. It will act as a role model, take a lead, and then ask others to follow. In this sense, the Obama administration is expected to minimize the role of nuclear weapons in its defense policy and request others not to rely on nukes either.

Although such posture is desirable and undoubtedly will draw significant support from the international community, a caveat is how favorable the Russian response would be. If the United States wants to invite Russia to join new disarmament negotiations, it will have to pay off as well. The most plausible price would be annulment or a scaling-back of the U.S. missile defense efforts around the world. It is not sure at the moment whether Washington is willing to pay that much of a price.

Preemption Doctrine

In the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, President Bush adopted the preemption doctrine as official American defense strategy in 2002. The doctrine was first proclaimed by President Bush at his Military Academy graduation speech in June the same year, and articulated in the National Security Strategy Report in September.

The doctrine was applied to the Iraq War in 2003, although some, including John Lewis Gaddis at Yale University say it war was in fact a preemptive war with the purpose of prevention. The Bush administration's adoption of a preemption doctrine was a shift of the U.S. strategic paradigm. Traditionally, U.S. administrations were careful not to exercise the preemption option because it could easily be criticized as unilateral, arrogant and even imperialistic.

Domestic political support for this doctrine is waning. Since evidence was not found to support the

core rationale of the war - Iraq's WMD development - the war has been largely regarded as a debacle, so much so that the preemption doctrine is losing ground.

It is not clear that the Obama administration will reverse the doctrine on preemption. The Phoenix Initiative Report mentioned that "strategic leadership requires being prepared to act swiftly and surely whenever required." And in addition, "it is necessary to be prepared to use force preventively if and when the circumstances demand."

At the same time, the report underscores the importance of carefully considering the conditions under which force might be used. A clear threat, a high likelihood of success at an acceptable cost, and a cause widely seen as just are necessary conditions for using force.

Considering these views, the Obama administration is expected not to put as much emphasis on preemption as the Bush administration did. Although not abandoning military operations falling into the preemption category, it is more likely that preemption will be exercised case-by-case only when such an action can draw broad international support - even after to the operation.

The North Korean issue

According to the positions revealed on the campaign trail, the Obama administration's North Korea strategy will be built around the following elements.

First, the basic principle the Obama administration holds regarding the North Korean nuclear crisis is to denuclearize North Korea completely and verifiably. The Democratic Party's platform announced on Aug. 29 this year emphasizes preventing the proliferation and use of WMD including nuclear weapons, and has a separate item on the denuclearization of North Korea. The platform states that the party supports verifiable denuclearization of North Korea and all diplomatic efforts to safely secure nuclear materials and weapons.

Second, Obama is determined to add momentum to the denuclearization process and complement the Six-Party Talks through tough and direct diplomacy with the DPRK. It is expected that the new administration will thoroughly analyze the process and the achievements of the Six-Party Talks during the past five years, and promote high-level talks with North Korea as a means to facilitate denuclearization. There is a possibility that liaison offices will be established in Pyongyang and Washington within Obama's first term in office and a communication channel on ministerial or vice-ministerial level will be established if North Korea responds favorably.

Third, bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang will be based on realistic judgment and experience, not on ambiguous illusion or wishful thinking. With the abrogation of the Geneva Agreed Framework, there are many people in the Democratic Party who believe that they should not let themselves be fooled by North Korea twice. Therefore, while elevating the level of direct communication with North Korea in order to speed up the denuclearization process, the new administration is likely to exert economic and diplomatic pressure if North Korea does not give up its nuclear program. It will urge North Korea to make a clear choice by presenting both the carrot and the stick.

Fourth, well aware of North Korea's track record of violating agreements, the Obama administration is likely to ask for more rigid verification than the Bush administration. As stated in the Democratic Party platform, "verifiability" will be one of the most important criteria for Obama in dealing with North Koreans. The administration will check the verifiability of all items on agreements and make sure that North Korea fulfills the agreements on every level.

In this regard, the Obama administration is likely to ask for stronger verification measures than

what was agreed during the Bush administration. In exchange for being removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, North Korea agreed on "visits to facilities, review of documentation and interviews with scientists." The new administration will regard material sampling as an indispensable condition for effective verification, and even push for inspections on undeclared facilities, the nuclear testing site, and explosive testing facilities which were practically exempted from verification under the current agreement. Considering its emphasis on international cooperation and multilateral organizations, the new administration also is likely to allocate the IAEA a bigger role on North Korea denuclearization.

Fifth, since the Obama administration is well aware of the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance, it will work to restore the damaged alliance between the two countries. In this context, the new U.S. administration will carefully listen to the opinions of the ROK government in the process of formulating its North Korea strategy. Some in South Korea argue that the Lee Myung-bak government should make its North Korea strategy more flexible so it is not marginalized as U.S.-DPRK relations radically improve during the Obama presidency. However, such an opinion is groundless. If well-prepared, change of leadership in Washington will provide Seoul with a great opportunity to secure the national interest based on the firm ROK-U.S. alliance.

The result of the U.S. election is probably very encouraging news for the North Korean regime. In high hopes that the new administration will be more favorable than the Republican administration, North Koreans might even expect to gain the status of "nuclear weapon state" like India or Pakistan, taking advantage of the flexibility of the new administration. However, the Northeast Asia region is fundamentally different from Southwest Asia. Moreover, North Korea and the United States are still technically at war. No president of the United States would allow an adversary to have nuclear weapons.

The major issue, at this juncture, is how patient the Obama administration will be. The moment Washington decides that negotiation alone is unable to shove Pyongyang into denuclearization, it will swiftly turn to a different approach and impose pressure on the North Korean regime on a whole new dimension.

One must be reminded that former President Bill Clinton, who came very close to attacking the Yongbyon nuclear facility in 1994 at the peak of the first North Korean nuclear crisis, and John Kerry, who declared that he would use force if negotiation proved futile, are both Democrats.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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